

Community and the social scientist

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AS most readers of this journal will already know, Robert Putnam's important and massively documented new book, *Bowling Alone: The Collapse and Revival of American Community*,[†] represents an elaboration of his memorable and enormously influential 1995 article of the same name, published in the *Journal of Democracy*. In that article, Putnam argued that a decline in the number of organized bowling leagues (among other such voluntary organizations) signified something deeper and more ominous: a shift in our culture toward an ethos of radical individualism and away from one in which the pervasiveness of such organizations encouraged social connectedness and civic engagement. Such a shift was reason for profound worry, he argued, for if allowed to continue unchallenged, it would deplete and in time exhaust the reserves of "social capital" built up by previous generations of Americans, and upon which our democratic institutions rely for their very existence.

Such an argument seemed to have instant plausibility for many Americans, and the article quickly achieved the status of universal referent in the conversations of educated people. For a while it was popping up everywhere one looked, not only in academic settings but also in op-ed columns, Sunday supplements, academic anthologies, and the like. The plaintive image in the title, "bowling alone," was sheer genius, on an evocative par with some of the most popular social-scientific titles of the 1950s, such as *The Lonely Crowd* or *The Crack in the Picture Window*. Bowling, that most homely and unpretentious of middle-American recreations, was being paired with the wistful melancholy of anomie and loneliness, giving us an image powerfully suggestive of the way that solid middle-class values of cooperation and community were being eroded and

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scattered and marginalized in contemporary America. It seemed to capture—as such pieces do when they are so successful—some deep and nagging anxieties and premonitions tugging at the edges of an otherwise untroubled national psyche.

In that sense, the essay's success marked it as an expression less of value-neutral social science than of the revivalistic tradition of the American jeremiad. This tradition of sermonizing, traceable back to the great Puritan divines of colonial New England (from whom Robert Putnam himself is descended), had from the beginning a social function as well as a theological one. It is meant to call a wayward people to repent of its bad habits and evil ways, to recover the fervor of its faith and the intensity of its devotion to the community, and to resolve to change direction, to return to the straight and righteous path. There is a long and distinguished tradition of such works in American life, one that stretches unbroken into the present era, despite the increasingly secular content of its message in our day. Notwithstanding its use of the concept of "social capital" and other terms drawn from the language of social science, "Bowling Alone" was really a sermon, framed and disguised as a social-scientific essay, and that is precisely why it found such a large audience. Even secular Americans still have the habit of giving and receiving sermons, and the individual and social rhythms of revivalism—of the fall into sin followed by the call to redemption and renewal, of corruption followed by purification—are built into their very bones. What is peculiar about our present post-Protestant era is that Americans prefer not to have their sermons labeled as such, but rather as concealed expressions of disinterested and unmoralistic science, which was yet another point in the favor of "Bowling Alone."

OR at least it was in some readers' minds. Yet the article also excited much criticism from Putnam's fellow social scientists, some of it quite stinging and dismissive, which took exception to his theoretical and methodological framework, his facts, and even his claim that things were getting worse. As a consequence, Putnam has labored hard and long in this book to answer his many critics decisively, restate his findings boldly, and place them in a beautifully executed historical framework, which solidifies his claim that the second half of the twentieth century has seen a quantitatively verifiable decline in popular participation in American politics and civic life. In short, Putnam is sticking to his guns—and then some. Not only has he re-

fused to concede an inch of significant territory to his opponents, he has extended his claims in important ways, seeking to establish the sources of the country's associational decline and the means of overcoming it.

It is hard to deny that he has accomplished much of that in the present work. While it will not silence his detractors, they have had to engage in something approaching willful misreading to continue to sustain their arguments against him. The review in the *American Prospect* by Garry Wills, for example, dismisses Putnam as a purveyor of Norman Rockwell-style "good-old-daysism," a careless charge that is not only verbally clumsy but completely unfair. In category after category of social life—participation in politics, religion, work, and the full range of formal and informal social associations such as Jaycees, PTAs, Lions, Elks, Boy Scouts, Red Cross—Putnam has produced solid and compelling data showing a precipitous collapse of civic engagement. On strictly social-scientific grounds, one would have to say that the book establishes his case compellingly and makes his argument a landmark with which any future writer on the subject of community will have to contend. As a piece of social-scientific research, *Bowling Alone* is quite simply magnificent.

MAGNIFICENT, and yet unpersuasive. For there has been something crucial lost in the transition from article to landmark. While *Bowling Alone* presents its reams of data and tables in as appealing a way as it is humanly possible to do, it has sacrificed the spark and poetry of the original essay, the winsome quality of being suggestive rather than definitive. This is more than a merely aesthetic consideration, for it goes to the very heart of what social science can and cannot accomplish.

Take the term "social capital." In the context of an essay, one readily accedes to its use, even with all its imprecision, as a metaphor, a shorthand way of describing the residuum of accumulated and aggregated social habits. One might wonder whether the word "habit" does not, in fact, serve just as well in most instances; still, there is some merit in comparing cultural accumulations with capital accumulations, so long as one does not get carried away with the idea. But the concept of "social capital" itself does not really correspond with the texture of our experience. It implies that there is such a thing as a nonspecific, fungible, flexible force of social association which can be drawn on for a variety of purposes with equal facility.

But that is not the way that our most fundamental social associations operate. If I have an elderly mother who is infirm and needs my care, do I care for her because it contributes to our fund of "social capital"? Or do I do it because I love her, feel obliged to her, and regard the preservation and continuation of her life as something sacred—and, on the negative side of the matter, because I fear the disapproval of others, and of God, if I fail to care for her? Is not my caring for her a devotion that is, by definition, not transferable to other causes and other venues? Do these questions not answer themselves?

THE Viennese wit Karl Kraus said of psychoanalysis that it is "the disease from which it pretends to be the cure." This aphorism can be applied more generally to social science, and with a good deal more sober truth than its wisecracking manner might seem to imply. Social science arose with the dawning of modernity. It is no coincidence that wistful talk of "community" and "authority" as abstract concepts has arisen in direct proportion to the rise of individual liberty and the loosening of social obligations. The vocabulary emerged as a way of describing the things that had been lost or rendered problematic. A persistent sense of their loss is one of the prices we pay for individual freedom. The more frequently we have recourse to the word "community," the more we are merely confirming our distance from the very thing that the word signifies.

Such language may lead us into thinking that the restoration of "community" is something we can simply choose. But that is not necessarily so. The existence even of strong and enduring voluntary associations depends upon the existence of strong involuntary associations or highly compulsory ones. We associate mainly because we have to, for economic and other nonvoluntary reasons. And when we do not need to associate, we don't. We bowl alone. We marry and divorce and remarry, and otherwise install "choice" in the place of all other sacraments. And, if my mother has all her needs taken care of by the U.S. government, I may well feel freer to leave her care to the tender mercies of others more "professional" than I. She may even internalize the idea that it is a sin for an elderly parent to become a "burden" to her children.

In this sense, Putnam has used social science to identify a problem that social science lacks the ability to solve—and that it may, in fact, exacerbate. After all, the invocation of "social

capital” as a category of analysis does not do one whit to promote the kind of moral renewal that rebuilds social capital. It can describe the breakdown, but it cannot repair it—and it may even perpetuate the breakdown. The vocabularies pro-pounded by social science will not and cannot renew commu-nity, and will likely divert our attention from what can.

The proof of this problem comes in the book’s concluding chapter, titled “Toward an Agenda for Social Capitalists,” which even Putnam’s most sympathetic reviewers have found unpersuasive. And rightly so. It is as if the book’s final section were written by an entirely different man. Putnam has punctu-ated his summarizations with italicized, manifesto-like cries, such as the following:

Let us spur a new, pluralistic, socially responsible “great awaken-ing,” so that by 2010 Americans will be more deeply engaged than we are today in one or another spiritual community of mean-ing, while at the same time becoming more tolerant of the faiths and practices of other Americans.

But a great awakening that meets all the advance specifica-tions of a liberal social scientist is no great awakening at all. The spirit bloweth where it listeth—or it bloweth not at all. And the current assault on the Boy Scouts, one of the last remaining voluntary associations that continues to be vibrant and effective—but an organization that may well be run into the ground by the forces of “pluralistic toleration”—suggests that Putnam is kidding himself if he thinks that his desire for revitalized community life can be squared with his other desiderata: liberalism, pluralism, tolerance, multiculturalism, etc. Real-world communities are formed by principles of ex-clusion as well as inclusion, and it is a fond fairy-tale to think otherwise.

THERE is, then, an inherent instability in the social-sci-entific and hortatory mix characterizing so many of the great American social-scientific classics, from *The Lonely Crowd* to *The Culture of Narcissism*—and to *Bowling Alone*, which surely will come to have that status in time. That instability is inher-ent in the very concept of “community.” Our ability to exter-nalize this concept and reify it is a mark of modernity and of our enduring existential distance from it. There is a poignant quality to this insight, for it means that the modern condition always contains an element of mourning for community lost. But it a choice that we have made, a price we have to pay, and

a knowledge that we are stuck with, though we will never rest easy in it. As Robert Nisbet observed, the whole discipline of sociology rests upon this strange displacement, the breakdown of connections that is characteristic of modern consciousness. Sociological knowledge makes us more aware of the necessity of the very things that its vocabulary declares to be off-limits. Which is another way of saying that it is indeed the disease from which it would be the cure. Of the making of laments for community lost, there is no end—nor should there be. But if Robert Putnam really wants to promote a great awakening, he may have to learn to speak and listen in a different vocabulary for his next book.